

March 20, 2025

Senator Janeen Sollman, Co-Chair  
Representative Ricki Ruiz, Co-Chair  
Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Education  
Oregon State Legislature  
900 Court St. NE  
Salem, OR 97301

RE: Support for Senate Bill 5515

**Dear Co-Chair Sollman, Co-Chair Ruiz and Members of the Joint Ways Education Subcommittee:**

My name is Paola Velazquez, and I am the mother of three young boys—ages 5, 3, and 1. We live in Seaside, Clatsop County, a rural area where the community is growing but still lacks essential services, particularly for children ages 0-5, and especially those with disabilities and special needs.

When my son Dante turned 2, I began to notice troubling signs in his development—missed milestones in behavior, cognition, and social interaction. I spent countless sleepless nights, but also faced immense frustration as I repeatedly went to his primary doctor, only to be told he was "still too young" for intervention. I felt dismissed and unheard. It wasn't until I reached out to Northwest Regional Education Service District (NWRES D) that my concerns were finally taken seriously. Unlike others, they didn't push my worries aside—they sprang into action, quickly setting Dante up to start receiving the intervention services he so desperately needed. Their response was a lifeline. Despite a backlog and an overloaded caseload, I felt heard for the first time. The team made me feel like I wasn't alone—like they were invested in Dante's future, too. This year, Dante was finally formally diagnosed with Hunter's Syndrome, Autism, and Intellectual Developmental Disorder through his medical team.

It has been three years since we began receiving support from NWRES D, and the transformation I've seen in Dante is nothing short of remarkable. More than just helping him with his behavior and development, their team has provided invaluable support for me as his mother—guiding me with advice, resources, and emotional support during the most difficult times. I don't just feel like a parent struggling with a child who needs help; I feel empowered, educated, and connected. I now have tools and strategies to help Dante succeed in ways I never imagined possible.

Thanks to NWRES D, Dante has been able to attend preschool, something that would have been impossible without the bus service they provided. The financial strain of driving him daily, particularly with the long distance between Seaside and Astoria, would have been overwhelming. But more than that, this experience has been transformational for Dante. Given his struggles with longer topic lessons, the need for more response time, additional visuals, and other accommodations, attending preschool would have been out of reach for him without the tailored support NWRES D provides. He is learning social skills, adapting to new environments, and experiencing "going to school"—a rite of passage that is so often taken for granted. Without NWRES D, these opportunities would have been impossible.

NWRES D has also fostered a sense of community for me and my family. We attended a playgroup where I could bring my other son and not worry about finding additional childcare. Their culturally tailored support group has created a space where we can connect with other parents facing similar challenges—parents who truly understand the unique struggles we encounter. Additionally, his

teachers recognized Dante's love for music and implemented more music time in their lesson plans. As a music fanatic, this adjustment has made a significant difference in his engagement and learning. Music has become a powerful tool in helping Dante participate more fully and develop new skills in a way that resonates with him.

I ask you to consider adding the \$24 million for Early Intervention (EI) and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) services, as well as the \$50 million for regional services to the senate bill 5515. The current proposal maintains EI/ECSE cuts from the last budget. These funds are crucial in ensuring that families like mine—especially those in rural areas—continue to have access to the resources that make all the difference. The first five years of a child's life are critical for their development, and for children like Dante, these services are not just helpful—they are essential.

Senator Sollman and Representative Ruiz, I urge you to take action. These funds will not only help my son, Dante, but countless other children and families who rely on these services. Thank you for your time, your consideration, and for your continued support of Oregon's children.

Sincerely,

Paola Velazquez, Mom of Dante